

Connecting Islamic Faith, Environmental Justice and Sustainability

Ms. Huda Alkaff

Founder & Director, Wisconsin Green Muslims

interfaith.earth@yahoo.com

Assalamu Alaikum / Peace be with you from Wisconsin Green Muslims!

Wisconsin Green Muslims

A state-wide grassroots environmental justice volunteer group formed in 2005, connecting faith and sustainability through education and service. It intends to educate its members, the Muslim community and the general public about the Islamic environmental teachings, to apply these teachings in daily life and to form coalitions with others working toward a just, healthy, peaceful and sustainable future. Our work is guided and inspired by the sacred teachings from the Qur'an –the Holy Book for Muslims- and the Hadith –reports on the sayings and traditions of Prophet Muhammad –peace be upon him.

For thirteen years, Wisconsin Green Muslims works on environmental justice issues as it relates to climate change, clean air and pure water, healthy food, solar energy and energy efficiency, waste reduction and transportation equity. With the sighting of the new crescent, it is always a new universal awakening opportunity and beginning to connect with the movement of the moon in its phases (new moon through full moon to new crescent) for the Islamic lunar Hijri calendar and the movement of the sun for the Islamic five daily prayers schedule (Fajr/dawn, Dhuhr/noon, Asr/afternoon, Maghrib/sunset, and Isha'/evening prayers), and the concept of Hijra –migration from the bad to the good, and toward better conditions for all humanity.

Muslim Responsibilities toward the Earth

It is a duty and obligation on Muslims to care for Earth, our common home. God states in the Qur'an (6:165), "*It is God who has made you viceroys on earth.*" The earth was mentioned more than 450 times in the Qur'an. Of course for a reason. There are approximately 1,500 environmental messages in the Qur'an and the Hadith that guide Muslims toward care for all God creatures and the sacred gifts and natural resources, such as water, air, food, light, land, etc.

Some of the Qur'an chapter titles are: The Cow, The Honey-Making Bees, The Light, The Ants, The Spider, The Star, The Iron, The People, The Pen, The Dawn, The Sun, The Moon, The Night, The Day, The Fig, The Elephant, etc. There are many stories, signs (Ayyat) and lessons. "Be like a Tree"; and "Be like a Bee," are some of the lessons in the Islamic teachings.

God mentions the grapes, onions, garlic, lentils, and many other plants, fruit, etc. in the Qur'an. God states in the Qur'an (6:141),

It is God who produceth gardens with trellises and without and dates and tilth with produce of all kinds and olives and pomegranates similar [in kind] and different [in variety]: eat of their fruit in their season but render the dues that are proper on the day that the harvest is gathered.

In Islam, there are clear teachings and signs about the important, beautiful and intricate balance of creation. God repeatedly tells us to maintain that balance and not to upset the order in creation. In the Qur'an (15:19), God says, *"And the earth We have spread out; set thereon mountains firm and immovable; and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance."* He instructed us to *"Eat and drink of that which God has provided (and permitted) and do not act corruptly, causing mischief on earth."* (2:60). Muslims are advised to be moderate in every aspect of life. In the Qur'an (7:31), *O Children of Adam ... eat and drink: but waste not by excess, for God loveth not the wasters.* Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) forbade a person to waste water even in washing for prayer on the bank of an abundantly flowing river.

Social Networks and Statements

At the time of darkness of environmental and climate injustices to the most vulnerable, current and future generations at home and around the world, it is important for us to do everything we can. Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) is reported to have said: If doomsday is about to take place while anyone of you has a tree sapling in your hand, which you can cultivate, then cultivate it for you will be rewarded.

At this time of darkness, it is urgent for us to work for light, love, unity, and climate justice. To stand up together against hate, division, and racism. We gather here in this conference to embrace each other in mutual respect, not turning our backs to the most marginalized and vulnerable in our neighborhoods and the world. *"...and God has set up the Balance (of Justice), in order that ye may not transgress (due) balance. So establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance: It is God Who has spread out the earth for all God's creatures"* (55:7-10). *"These are the Signs of God: We rehearse them to thee in Truth: And God means no injustice to any of God's creatures"* (3:108)

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. The EPA has this goal for all communities and persons across this nation. It will be achieved when everyone enjoys:

- the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards, and
- equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work.

The justice in the environmental justice movement begins with two central issues: the inequity in the distribution of environmental risks, and the recognition of the diversity of the participants and experiences in the environmental justice movement.

Pre-existing social networks played a part in the development of the environmental justice movement. Delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held on October 24-27, 1991, in Washington DC, drafted and adopted 17 principles of Environmental Justice. Since then, *The Principles* have served as a defining document for the growing grassroots movement for environmental justice.

On December 6-8, 1996, forty people of color and European-American representatives met in Jemez, New Mexico, for the “Working Group Meeting on Globalization and Trade.” The Jemez meeting was hosted by the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice with the intention of hammering out common understandings between participants from different cultures, politics and organizations. The following *Jemez Principles* for democratic organizing were adopted by the participants, and are instrumental guide in the environmental justice work.

- #1 Be Inclusive
- #2 Emphasis on Bottom-Up Organizing
- #3 Let People Speak for Themselves
- #4 Work Together In Solidarity and Mutuality
- #5 Build Just Relationships Among Ourselves
- #6 Commitment to Self-Transformation

“As we change societies, we must change from operating on the mode of individualism to community-centeredness. We must ‘walk our talk.’ We must be the values that we say we’re struggling for and we must be justice, be peace, be community.”

Across all faiths we share a moral obligation to not harm others, to be fair and to care for the vulnerable. We, people of diverse faiths and backgrounds, stand with Pope Francis on climate change.¹ Preventing damage to the global climate and alleviating the pain and suffering of the marginalized and vulnerable communities are a moral and religious duty and obligation. We are responsible to take care of Earth - our common home.

The ecological encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, released on June 18, 2015 –the first day of the national Greening Ramadan Campaign- cited a Muslim scholar and mystic, Shaikh Ali al-Khawas. In paragraph 233, Pope Francis speaks of how God reveals Himself in every part of creation. “There is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face,” writes the Pope. The footnote # 159 references Shaykh Ali al-Khawas, a 16th century Muslim Sufi poet, teacher and mystic, which includes a quote from al-Khawas’ writings.

¹ See Francis, *Laudato Si'*, and Ebrahim Moosa, “Reflection on Pope Francis’ encyclical Laudato Si’” at the [2018 Luce-Hartford Conference](#).

“There is a subtle mystery in each of the movements and sounds of this world,” wrote al-Khawas. “The initiate will capture what is being said when the wind blows, the trees sway, water flows, flies buzz, doors creak, birds sing, or in the sound of strings or flutes, the sighs of the sick, the groans of the afflicted...”

On August 18, 2015, a bold **Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change** was released. It is in harmony with the Papal encyclical and received the support of the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace of the Holy See. The Declaration calls for a rapid phase-out of fossil fuels and a switch to 100% renewable energy, as well as increased support for vulnerable communities and climate refugees already suffering from global climate impacts.²

I am pleased to report that we have concluded a successful national Greening Ramadan campaign with more than thirty-seven Mosques –including two from CT - in over seventeen states participating. Recently the largest Muslim organization in the USA, the **Islamic Society of North America** along with many faith communities have divested from fossil carbon and are moving forward toward a just and equitable 100% renewable energy future.³

Wisconsin Green Muslims Interfaith Initiatives

The Islamic teachings are rich with environmental messages, and the true practice of Islam really means living simply, treading lightly on Earth, caring for our neighbors and all creatures, standing up for justice, and collaborating with others to care for our common home. People of faith, Muslims included, have a great responsibility to stand up for environmental justice and address the concerns and calamities of the poor and marginalized communities, those with the lowest ecological footprints, yet they are the most impacted by environmental and climate disasters. It is a moral issue, and the interfaith voice standing united for environmental justice and care of creation is instrumental in mobilizing the faithful for the common good.

Currently, Wisconsin Green Muslims has two interfaith initiatives; “Wisconsin Faith and Solar” and “Faithful Rainwater Harvesting” (FaRaH). FaRaH, which means joy in Arabic, connects faith communities with the unifying powers of sunlight and rainwater, as sacred trusts and gifts, while providing valuable peer-learning and education, assessments, and collaborative benefits to advance equitable solar and solutions to flooding, so that together we increase our understanding, appreciation and care of our common home.⁴

The Wisconsin Faith, Environmental Justice and Solar Initiative, received high approval ratings from people from diverse backgrounds, reaching 1,750 people of at least eighteen different religions and spiritualities in Wisconsin and counting.⁵ This is an interfaith peer learning program built on the foundation of trust in the unifying power of solar energy to bring people of

² See <http://www.ifees.org.uk/declaration/>.

³ See <http://www.greenfaith.org/programs/divest-and-reinvest/islamic-society-of-north-america-announces-fossil-fuel-divestment>.

⁴ See <https://wisconsingreenmuslims.org/farah/>.

⁵ See <https://wisconsingreenmuslims.org/faithsolar/>.

faith and morality together to care for Earth –our common home-, save money to reinvest in their missions and to move forward toward an equitable 100% renewable energy future.

Both initiatives have three components. First, a social and educational component, where we're building a peer learning circle of those who have built solar or green infrastructure and those aspiring to do so. Secondly, we have the financial component, where we provide free and discounted remote and on-site solar assessments and consultations. We love spreading the good news, telling people "Your site is a solar-promising site." Thirdly is the spiritual component. We see sunlight and water as the commons. No one owns them, and everyone should have access to them. Both sunlight and water are sacred gifts and sacred trusts. We need to appreciate them and welcome them responsibly into our homes, congregations, and lives.

Wisconsin Green Muslims is recognized as the first faith community/group in Wisconsin to earn the national **GreenFaith - Water Shield** certificate.⁶ This certification signifies that Wisconsin Green Muslims has taken educational, spiritual and practical steps to conserve water, protect water quality, and mobilize its members and community to do the same at home. Several examples of our work will be shared in this presentation.

With support from the **Climate Advocacy Lab**, while studying the impact of the unifying power of solar in helping overcome Islamophobia in Wisconsin, we compared the differences in the framing effects of Wisconsinites who receive a Muslim frame versus those who receive a Christian frame. Specifically, and using Google consumer surveys, we presented different samples with a photo of either a female Muslim (wearing hijab) or a female Christian pastor (wearing a neckband) with the attached statement: "Solar energy reduces air pollution, saves money, and creates jobs in our communities – which is why religious groups across Wisconsin are installing solar panels on their places of worship."

Three dependent variables were assessed, measured as follows:

- 1) How interested are you in learning more about the Faith and Solar initiative in Wisconsin?
- 2) To what extent do you agree Faith and Solar is an organization that shares your values?
- 3) Do you support or oppose increasing the amount of electricity Wisconsin generates from solar power?

With the sizes of the samples ranged from 500 to 516 individuals, two-sample t-tests to test for statistically significant difference between the means of the Muslim frame-receiving sample and the Christian frame-receiving sample demonstrated that the Christian frame-receiving sample indicated a significantly greater interest in learning more about the Faith and Solar initiative in Wisconsin. However, the survey results also showed that there are no statistically significant differences for the second (i.e. sharing of values) and third (i.e. solar support) dependent variables.

⁶ See <http://www.greenfaith.org/programs/greenfaith-shield/greenfaith-water-shield>.

Building on this active ray of hope and light, our Wisconsin Faith Communities for Equitable Solar is gaining momentum. We are generating from the people by the people Wisconsin's Just Solar guiding principles rooted in our collective values of justice, equity and inclusion. It is time to light the way. The intensity of light is stronger in darkness, providing greater opportunity for light to lead the way. Let's continue to work together countering darkness and spreading light. Shine On!

Conclusion

I conclude with this prayer,

Our Lord, we seek refuge in You from knowledge that does not benefit; and from action that is not elevated; Our Lord, we seek refuge in You from an eye that does not weep (out of love and awe of You); from an ego that is never satisfied; and from a supplication that is not heard.

God, we ask You for a heart that is humbled in devotion to You; for a tongue busy with remembering You and expressing gratitude to You; for actions that are righteous and accepted by You; and for a certainty (in You) that is genuine and true.

Our Lord, move us to love and care for Your world. Make us ready to work for the good of all creation. Help us tread lightly and use wisely.

God, You are our forgiving Creator. You create raindrops of blessings to saturate the parched lips of your servants. Make us instruments of change to rid Your creation of harm as we strive to transform the hardships and trials we endure into blessings and opportunities that benefit our world.

Our Lord, pour Your love into our hearts and fill us with compassion to answer the call of the climate change refugees and the most vulnerable populations. Grant us clear thinking, right action, and a gentle life-style.

God, unite us, and empower us to serve in restoring the world, protecting creation, the healing of Earth and renewal of all life in a just, peaceful and sustainable way. Transform our lives, enhance our renewable energy resources, strengthen our collaborative work and relationships, reduce our ecological footprint, and enable us to stand up together for environmental justice, climate justice, clean air, clean water, healthy food, sanitation and peaceful existence for all as human rights and creation rights issues.

Amen.

Thank you.

Peace / Salam

Huda Alkaff, Founder and Director Wisconsin Green Muslims
June 18, 2018